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## **Gendering Leadership and Policy during Covid-19: Jacinda Ardern and the women's vote**

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### **Introduction**

During the first six months of 2020, international media focussed on whether women political leaders were more effective than their male counterparts at managing the Covid-19 crisis. New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern was front and centre of many of these analyses. Her inclusive and reassuring communication style accompanied comparatively extreme measures towards elimination, including international border closures, national lockdowns, and mandatory quarantine for New Zealanders returning to the country.

The 2020 election was one in which women leaders featured across the political spectrum. Judith Collins had taken the helm of National a little less than two months before the scheduled election date of 19 September, in part because the party was struggling in the polls.<sup>1</sup> In addition, of the three minor parties that entered parliament in 2020, two—Te Pāti Māori (the Māori Party) and the Green Party—had a woman co-leader. Alongside this, the 2020 result saw the largest number of women candidates (48 per cent) elected to parliament.

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<sup>1</sup> On 17 August, the election was rescheduled to 17 October 2020. Collins became leader on 12 July 2020.

In this chapter, we explore the extent to which New Zealand voters' views reflected the international awe of Ardern's leadership, and whether women's opinions on key policy issues shed light on whether women felt sufficiently included in the 'Team of Five Million'. Drawing on the NZES, we explore the responses of women and men of different ages to questions of women's leadership, as well as to leadership attributes of trust, competence, and likeability. We also investigate voters' perceptions of issues and government policy responses in relation to women's and men's policy preferences, with a particular focus on health, given the prominence and impact of the pandemic, with an exploration of differences among women.<sup>2</sup>

As such, we examine the extent to which the descriptive and symbolic representations of women as political leaders are connected to the substantive representation of policy issues in the 2020 New Zealand election. While this election featured two high-profile women major-party leaders, there was little campaigning by them on gender-related topics, which was largely left to the Greens. In its glowing endorsement of Prime Minister Ardern, the international media missed the fact that the government's pandemic economic recovery policies had focussed largely on traditionally male jobs with limited investment in the care economy and marginal support for those on benefits.

We find that New Zealand women voters continue to be more supportive than their male counterparts of increasing expenditure on social policy and health. And, despite its lack of a gender-specific policy lens on key issues relating to Covid-19, Labour was not penalised for this absence. Indeed, women returned to Labour in larger numbers than ever. The party also won its largest share of the male vote since the advent of the MMP electoral system in 1996. However, the gender gaps in vote choice are not stagnant over time, meaning these wins for Labour cannot be taken for granted.

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2 The full sample (before standard sample weighting for gender, age, and Māori descent was applied) contained responses from 2,112 women (56.6 per cent of the sample), 1,563 men (41.9 per cent), and 15 participants who identified as 'gender diverse' (0.4 per cent). Further work could explore the voter preferences of gender-diverse voters (see, for example, Worthen 2020), however, we excluded this group from the analyses due to their small sample size.

## Bringing a gender lens to pandemic political leadership

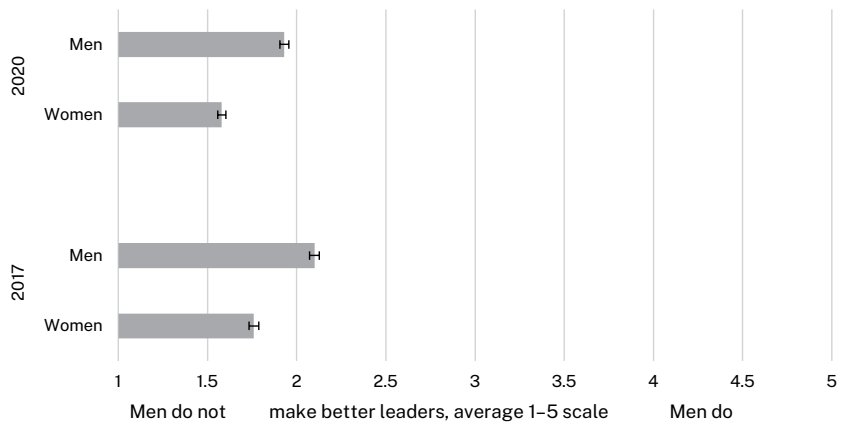
Crisis events heighten people's anxiety and their expectations of political leaders and, in response, political leaders must provide rapid and comprehensive policy and political solutions that rhetorically and substantively straddle political divides. As such, crisis leadership differs from routine political leadership. The risks are much higher, the public is more attentive, and the decision-making is more urgent (Ansell et al. 2014). With the advent of Covid-19 and the resulting cross-national variations in policy responses, there has been increased interest in gender and crisis leadership (Politics and Gender 2020). The challenge for such research is that there is a very limited pool of women leaders globally to test whether this descriptive representation impacts on policy outcomes or voters' interpretation thereof.

In New Zealand, women political leaders are not new. The 2020 election is the second general election in which both the Labour and the National parties were led by women and Ardern was New Zealand's third woman prime minister. Given this, we could expect both men and women to be comfortable with the idea of women's political leadership, irrespective of the pandemic.

To investigate this, the NZES asked respondents whether, overall, men make better leaders than women. Answers are indicated on a scale of one (strongly disagree) to five (strongly agree), with three being neutral (see Figure 7.1). We found statistically significant differences between groups' opinions of gendered fitness for leadership ( $p < 0.001$ ), with men's average score of 1.83, higher than the 1.52 of women. However, in both groups, the mean rating is low (and lower than in 2017), indicating a low average level of agreement with the statement (Curtin and Greaves 2020, 193).

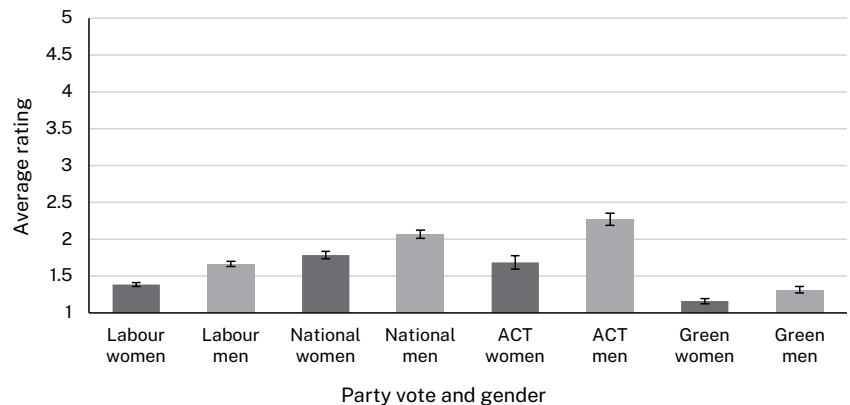
We also examined these results according to the combination of gender and party vote and found statistically significant differences between combinations of gender and party vote in their average rating of the statement ( $p < 0.001$ ) (Figure 7.2). Men voting ACT and National scored highest on agreement. However, the average for ACT-voting men is still lower than the midpoint of the scale. This indicates that, across the board, people tend to disagree with this statement, regardless of their gender and party vote combination. The biggest difference between men and women

within the same party was found for ACT voters, with a difference of 0.59 of a point between genders. The differences were similar for National and Labour at 0.28 each, while Green Party voters had the smallest gender difference. Overall, this shows a low level of general agreement with the notion that men make better political leaders than women, with some patterns of difference depending on gender and party vote.



**Figure 7.1 Do men make better leaders than women? 2017–2020**

Source: Vowles et al. (2022).

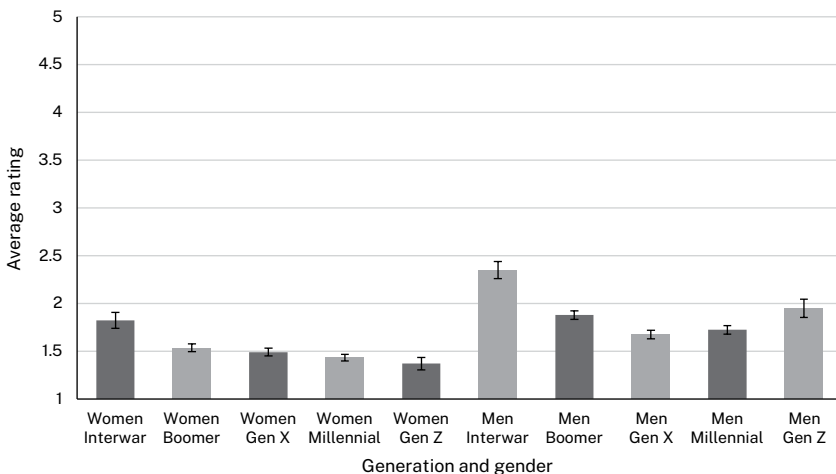


**Figure 7.2 Do men make better leaders than women? Gender and party vote**

Source: Vowles et al. (2022).

We found that when organised according to gender and generation, there were statistically significant differences between groups ( $p < 0.001$ ) in their average rating of the statement (see Figure 7.3). Again, these responses all fall below the scale midpoint of three, indicating general disagreement with the statement across generation and gender. Comparing genders within the same generation, women of all generations were less likely to agree with the statement than men from their cohort.

However, the gender dimensions of the generational groupings suggest more analysis is required. Specifically, we see different patterns among men across generations.<sup>3</sup> The highest mean agreement was from men of the interwar generation, but the second-highest mean agreement was for men from Generation Z (those born after 1996). This suggests that while women become increasingly accepting of women's fitness for political leadership over time, this may not be the case for men. Future research will need to monitor the attitudes of younger men specifically to explore whether this is a real effect (that is, not based on a small subsample size). However, the universally low level of agreement with the statement, and the small downward shift over time, could indicate that women's leadership is viewed as increasingly normal over time.



**Figure 7.3 Do men make better leaders than women? Generation and gender**

Source: Vowles et al. (2022).

<sup>3</sup> The age categories are as follows: War and interwar: born 1945 or earlier; Baby Boomers: born 1946–64; Generation X: born 1965–79; Millennials: born 1980–96; and Generation Z: born after 1996.

Despite these gender gaps in attitudes to who is best suited to political leadership, Jacinda Ardern's leadership style garnered much attention before and during the pandemic (Anderson 2020; Curtin 2020c; Curtin and Greaves 2020; Friedman 2020; Taub 2020). In the 2017 election campaign, Ardern's political rhetoric emphasised kindness, inclusion, and hope, and frequently elicited a transformative policy agenda that would address poverty, inequality, and climate change.

Analysis of the 2017 NZES showed that this discursive approach was inclusive and convincing enough to prevent divisive or extreme populist politics from taking hold (Curtin and Greaves 2020). Once elected, Ardern's references to kindness and her inclusive, 'embracing' political rhetoric became a recurring theme of her first prime ministerial term. In her statement to the UN General Assembly in 2018, Ardern said:

Be it domestic, or international, we are operating in challenging times ... Perhaps then it is time to step back from the chaos and ask what we want. It is in that space that we'll find simplicity. The simplicity of peace, of prosperity, of fairness. If I could distil it down into one concept that we are pursuing in New Zealand it is simple and it is this. Kindness. (Ardern 2018)

Six months later, Ardern again invoked 'kindness' in response to the 15 March 2019 Christchurch terrorist attack, in which 51 people were killed. At press conferences and in subsequent statements, Ardern spoke of inclusion and compassion. Her embracing positioning of those who were affected gained substantial popular currency (Ardern 2019). Her government also acted rapidly to reform New Zealand's gun ownership laws, with the *Arms Act* amendment passing on 10 April 2019, supported by all but one MP.

This compassion and determined resolve became features of Ardern's leadership from the outset of the Covid-19 pandemic (Craig 2021; Curtin 2020a; Johnson and Williams 2020; Pullen and Vachhani 2020). In a response that deviated from that in most OECD countries, her government closed the international border and imposed strict domestic lockdowns to suppress viral transmission. New Zealand's geographic isolation 'at the bottom of the South Pacific'—a feature to which Ardern had drawn attention in her UN speech two years earlier—facilitated this response. The public health and economic policy measures that accompanied it were not unlike those seen elsewhere, but such restrictive policies were nonetheless not without political risk (Curtin and O'Sullivan 2023). However, Ardern's

pre-existing emphasis on kindness and mutual care, in both state and society, ensured the Team of Five Million became an accepted part of her Covid-19 communication strategy (Beattie and Priestley 2021).

More generally, Ardern's use of mainstream and social media and her style of communication helped build support for her government's Covid-19 response. As the pandemic took hold, it became 'a matter of routine for many New Zealanders to have the prime minister in their homes', whether through the daily press conferences or Ardern's tendency to develop a 'personal-connection approach' through her use of social media (Bickerton 2021, 174). This was not a new strategy for the prime minister: in 2018, she announced her pregnancy on Instagram and, six months later, she announced a new family assistance package on Facebook Live as she cradled her newborn daughter.

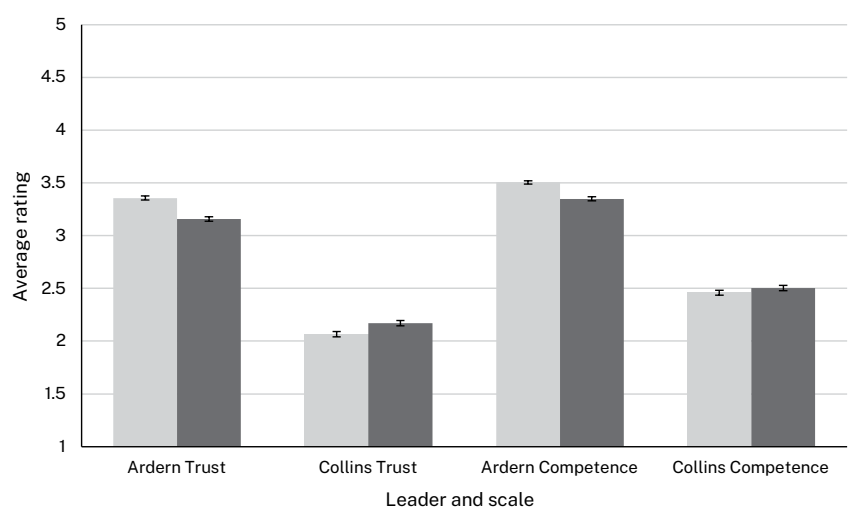
Facebook was Ardern's preferred medium. There she exuded a comfortable conversational style, which—in the face of uncertainty, fear, misinformation, and some citizen scepticism—served as an important means to allay anxieties during the pandemic and the 2020 election campaign. It also enabled Ardern to supplement the traditional manicured style of television appearances and daily press conferences. Like traditional media, however, Ardern's online communications remained largely monodirectional, giving her 'tighter control' over her message while largely preserving the feeling of personal connection (Bickerton 2021, 176). The approach seemingly worked. In 2020, *PRovoke Media's* global survey of public relations experts ranked Ardern as the most impressive leader for Covid-19 communications (Sudhaman 2020). A 2020 Scottish study argued that her warm, informal use of Facebook Live helped convey vital Covid-19 messages in a clear, relatable, and authentic way (McGuire et al. 2020).

National opposition leader Judith Collins' leadership style differed markedly from Ardern's. In her memoir *Pulling No Punches*, Collins reveals her scepticism of centrism, which she views as an excuse to do nothing and stand for nothing. In contrast to National Party Prime Minister John Key (2008–16), Collins' preference was to appeal to National's conservative base in a way that was reminiscent of the approach of National's earlier leader Don Brash (2003–06) to economics and 'separatist politics' (Curtin 2020b). Collins' maiden speech and her memoir demonstrate a disdain for what she calls the 'lazy gene' and a welfare system that 'funded women to have multiple children' (Collins 2002). Her direct and combative rhetoric

differentiated her from Ardern. Collins was rewarded for this with positive verdicts after the first two televised leaders’ debates. It was not evident, however, that this endeared Collins to the wider electorate.

While the NZES does not ask participants about perceived kindness or hostility in political rhetoric, it does include questions about three leadership attributes: trustworthiness, competence, and likeability. Given Collins’ and Ardern’s divergent leadership styles, we were particularly interested in whether there were gender gaps among participants on these three attributes. We found that Ardern scored significantly higher than Collins among both women and men on measures of trustworthiness and competence (see Figure 7.4). In addition, there were larger differences between men’s and women’s perceptions of Ardern’s competence and trustworthiness than there were for Collins.

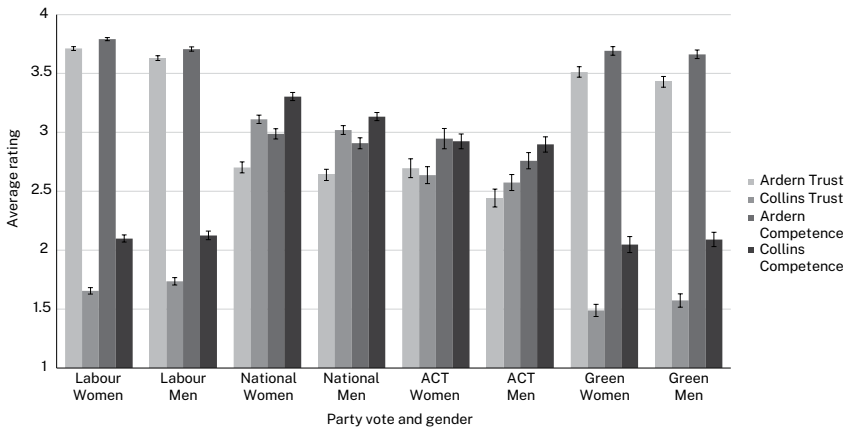
Unsurprisingly, perceptions of Ardern’s and Collins’ competence and trustworthiness were related to party vote (see Figure 7.5). Both Labour and Green-voting men and women perceived Ardern as more competent and trustworthy than Collins, although women scored Ardern higher than did men on both attributes. Collins, on average, scored below the midpoint of the scale on both attributes among Labour and Green-voting men and women, although men in this left bloc rated Collins higher on average than did women.



**Figure 7.4 Ratings of Ardern’s and Collins’ trustworthiness and competence**

Source: Vowles et al. (2022).





**Figure 7.5 Ratings of Ardern and Collins by party and gender**

Note: The maximum rating was four.

Source: Vowles et al. (2022).

By contrast, National-voting men and women were less favourable of Ardern and demonstrated the highest average ratings of Collins' competence and trustworthiness. However, the average ratings across both attributes were often relatively close between men and women who voted for the same party, but with clear left and right blocs evident. For example, there were only marginal differences between Labour women's average ratings of both Ardern's and Collins' competence and trustworthiness and those of Labour men. This was also the case for men and women who voted Green. In addition, Ardern's average ratings on all attributes sat much closer to Collins' among men and women National and ACT voters. Both Ardern's and Collins' competence was rated higher than their trustworthiness among all party vote–gender blocs. Nevertheless, as demonstrated by Jack Vowles in this volume, trust in Ardern was significant in explaining Labour's landslide victory in 2020.

The third attribute we explored was likeability, which was rated by respondents on a scale from zero to ten. Ardern scored high among both women and men, and her likeability increased from 2017.<sup>4</sup> We also found a statistically significant gender gap, with women liking Ardern more than did men. Collins, by contrast, did not score high on likeability.

<sup>4</sup> Ardern increased her likeability score from 2017, with a one-point increase among women and a 0.8-point increase among men.

**Table 7.1 Gender differences in leader likeability**

Leader	Women	Men	Gender gap
Jacinda Ardern (Labour)	7.9	7.1	0.8***
Judith Collins (National)	3.7	3.8	-0.2
James Shaw (Greens co-leader)	4.9	4.3	0.6***
Marama Davidson (Greens co-leader)	4.9	4.1	0.8***
Winston Peters (New Zealand First)	3.3	3.4	0.0
David Seymour (ACT)	4.3	4.5	-0.2
John Tamihere (Te Pāti Māori)	2.8	2.6	0.2*
Debbie Ngarewa-Packer (Te Pāti Māori)	3.2	2.7	0.5***
Leighton Baker (New Conservatives)	2.1	1.8	0.3*
Geoff Simmons (TOP)	2.5	2.5	0.0
Billy Te Kahika (Advance NZ)	1.4	1.1	0.3*

\*  $p < 0.05$

\*\*  $p < 0.01$

\*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

Notes: Results of t-tests between men and women on the 0–10-point liking rating scale. Positive values indicate a leader was liked more by women than by men.<sup>5</sup> Women tend to like leaders more than do men (a difference of an average of 0.2 overall); they are also far more likely to rate leaders with ‘don’t know’ than are men (who express an opinion more often); women represent 57–62 per cent of the ‘don’t know’ responses across leaders.

Source: Vowles et al. (2022).

There was also a statistically significant difference between male and female likeability preferences for both Greens co-leaders, with women more than men preferring both James Shaw and Marama Davidson. This was also true for several smaller party leaders, including the New Conservatives and Advance NZ as well as Te Pāti Māori co-leader John Tamihere. The gender gap in leader likeability was highly significant for Debbie Ngarewa-Packer. That Davidson and Ngarewa-Packer were rated as more likeable by women than men reflects findings from previous NZES analyses, which show that Māori women leaders tend to be liked less by men relative to women.<sup>6</sup>

5 Interacting comparative income (1–5 scale) and participant occupational groups with gender finds either a flat line or a tendency for people on higher incomes to like Ardern less. As we did not undertake modelling on the intersection of ‘class’ and gender, we assume this finding represents partisan bias.

6 These findings are yet to be published; contact the authors for more information.

## Gender gaps in vote choice and policy preferences

International literature on the gender gap has suggested that women have always been more likely than men to care more about social than economic issues and to favour maintaining spending on health and welfare over tax cuts and market deregulation (Inglehart and Norris 2000; Gidengil et al. 2003). Various reasons explain this gender gap. In the postwar period, structural and cultural explanations were commonplace. Women's religiosity was one reason, as was the fact that women, as primary caregivers, were more likely to rely on the state for income and welfare support. For many years, conservative parties were seen as most likely to garner support from women (Curtin 2014).

In the late twentieth century, with changes in labour market participation, the rise of social movements, and shifting gender roles came evidence that greater numbers of women were voting for left-leaning parties. This did not reflect the fact that women voters were less interested in their family and domestic caregiving roles, but that they had become providers of care in both the private and the public spheres. Women's choice to vote left was posited to be connected to both an ethics of care and rational choice—because health, welfare, and education policies mattered to women's families' wellbeing and to women's financial wellbeing as public sector employees (Campbell 2006).

The 1980s saw the advent of large-scale labour market deregulation, public sector retrenchment, and cuts to social expenditure across many high-income democracies. This did not, however, always result in increased support from women for parties on the left. This can be explained by the fact that, historically, the industrial wings of left-leaning parliamentary parties and trade unions, were typically slow to recognise women as more than a supply of temporary labour (Curtin 1999). Furthermore, some countries bucked women voters' left realignment trend (Campbell and Shorrocks 2021; Shorrocks and Grasso 2020). In summary, the gender voting gap is not static, nor is it predictable in its direction of change, reminding us that women are not a monolithic voting bloc (Campbell 2006; Everitt 1998; Kellstedt et al. 2010; Shorrocks and Grasso 2020).

In line with international trends, early New Zealand election surveys found that women were more likely to vote for the right than the left (Vowles 1993). However, despite the activism of women's groups and the gender

divisions associated with the 1981 Springbok Tour of New Zealand, there is little evidence of a consistent realignment of women voters to the left in the 30 years after the 1981 election (Vowles 1993; Coffé 2013). The available survey data show that between 1963 and 1993, women made up between 45 per cent and 51 per cent of National’s support and 36 per cent and 43 per cent of Labour’s support.

Table 7.2 reveals that women’s votes for Labour and National have fluctuated under MMP. The columns, by party, display women’s and men’s votes, as well as the gender party vote gap (percentage of men, subtracting the percentage of women, with a positive value indicating more women than men preferring the respective party). In every election but 2002, 2011, and 2014 there was a statistically significant difference between genders across the major parties. In 2020, there was effectively no gender gap for National voters, with men and women equally likely to vote for that party. In addition, the gender voting gap for National has been more stable over time than for Labour. In Labour’s case, there is a broader gender voting gap between men and women. The gap widened in 2020, suggesting that more women than men switched their vote to Labour that year. Overall, there is typically more gender variation between men and women on the left than on the right—evident both in 2020 and over time.

**Table 7.2 Gender gap in party vote: National/Labour parties, 1996–2020**

Year	National			Labour		
	Women	Men	Gap	Women	Men	Gap
1996***	33	35	–2	32	24	8
1999***	31	30	1	43	34	9
2002 n.s.	19	18	1	44	39	5
2005***	32	38	–6	41	33	7
2008***	36	40	–4	37	30	7
2011 n.s.	41	40	1	29	25	4
2014 n.s.	34	37	–3	21	18	3
2017**	35	33	–2	33	24	9
2020***	24	24	0	55	42	13

\*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

\*\*  $p < 0.05$

\*  $p < 0.10$

n.s. = not significant

Note: Significance on basis of 2 x 2 tables (National and Labour voters only).

Sources: Curtin and Greaves (2020, 197); Vowles et al. (2022).

Table 7.3 presents gender voting gaps for non-major parties in 2020. There are statistically significant vote choice differences evident between women and men Green, ACT, and TOP voters. While the number of participants who gave their votes to TOP was small, the results for the Greens and ACT serve as a reminder that gender gaps are about men's voting choice as well as women's (Campbell and Shorrocks 2021; Hill 2006). Our data indicate that while both women and men deserted National, women appeared to go to Labour in greater numbers than did men; indeed, Labour's women's vote was its highest ever under MMP. Although men's vote for Labour in 2020 was its highest since 2002, men may have shared their discontent with National more widely than did women. Although further analysis is required before we can claim evidence of the realignment of women to the left, these gendered variations suggest it is important to look at women's attitudes to the government's responses to Covid-19. This is especially important given the presence of women leaders and comparative evidence that social and health policies are typically more important election issues for women than for men (Campbell 2006; Gidengil et al. 2003).

**Table 7.3 Voting choice for all parties by gender**

Party	Women (%)	Men (%)	Gender difference (women–men)	
<b>Labour</b>	<b>45.4</b>	<b>35.5</b>	<b>9.9</b>	<b>***</b>
National	20.9	20.8	0.1	
<b>Green</b>	<b>5.4</b>	<b>7.3</b>	<b>-1.9</b>	<b>*</b>
New Zealand First	1.6	2.7	-1.1	
<b>ACT</b>	<b>4.4</b>	<b>8.3</b>	<b>-3.9</b>	<b>***</b>
Māori Party	0.9	1.0	-0.1	
<b>TOP</b>	<b>0.5</b>	<b>2.0</b>	<b>-1.5</b>	<b>***</b>
New Conservatives	0.8	0.9	-0.1	
Others	1.4	3.1	-1.7	
Did not vote	18.7	18.4	0.3	

\*  $p < 0.05$

\*\*  $p < 0.01$

\*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

Note: For Pearson Chi-square tests conducted across genders for party vote.<sup>7</sup>

Source: Vowles et al. (2022).

<sup>7</sup> While #MeToo achieved a global profile in terms of drawing attention to gendered patterns of behaviour, we have not tested whether this movement impacted on the gender gap. However, as noted in Chapter 8 of this volume, those supporting minor and microparties on the right were impacted by their negative perceptions of Ardern.

## Connecting women's leadership and policy responsiveness

Feminist political scientists are interested in the way that descriptive representation of women translates into the substantive representation of women, including questions about whether women's legislative presence influences policy agendas (Celis and Childs 2012; Curtin 2008; Forman-Rabinovici and Sommer 2019; Lowande et al. 2019; Phillips 1995; Sawyer et al. 2006; Sawyer 2012; Wängnerud 2009).<sup>8</sup> What is apparent is that women legislators have distinct policy priorities and are typically more assertive than men in advocating for social welfare and women's rights issues in legislative committees and debates, and in the sponsorship of bills (Swers 2016; see also Childs and Krook 2009; Grey 2006).

Research from other disciplines comes to similar conclusions about women politicians' role in advancing health policy specifically. For example, the percentage of women in both legislatures and governments is found to have an impact on mortality rates over time. Declining rates of mortality are evident net of alternative explanations and irrespective of the party in government in both single-country and large cross-national studies (Cunial 2021; Hessel et al. 2020; Macmillan et al. 2018; Ng and Muntaner 2019). Underpinning these findings is the hypothesis that women parliamentarians and government members are more likely than men to raise health issues and are more likely to advocate for, or support, increased healthcare spending.

More recently, others have explored the relationship between women political leaders and Covid-19 policy and management. First, women political leaders were found to react more rapidly and decisively than their male counterparts in the initial stages of the pandemic, implementing border closures and lockdowns to reduce fatalities and cases. Several possible explanations have been offered (Aldrich and Lotito 2020; Garikipati and Kambhampati 2021). Experimental research indicates that women leaders are likely to be more risk-averse than men, especially in the face of outcome uncertainty (Purkayastha et al. 2020; Garikipati and Kambhampati 2021). Such uncertainty during the Covid-19 pandemic could have led women leaders to prioritise precautionary measures over those that focussed on the economy.

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8 A Google Scholar search of the term 'substantive representation of women' reveals almost 20,000 results between 2018 and 2022.

Second, women leaders were found to be more open to seeking public health experts' advice and were more relational and communicative with affected communities (Vroman and Danko 2020).<sup>9</sup> Third, most of the women-led countries had a historical propensity towards both social equality and comparatively robust and accessible healthcare systems—both factors that facilitate a public health–focussed response. However, some caution is necessary when seeking to infer a strong connection between women's leadership and pandemic management from cross-national comparisons because the number of women leaders is small and the diversity among dependent variables is substantial (Piscopo 2020).

This is not to say that gender and partisanship are irrelevant to gendered policy agendas. Swers (2016) shows that in the United States, championing health care, for example, is likely to provide rewards for Democrat women because the Democrats have issue ownership of this domain. Republican women may still champion health and welfare, but with different framing: while Democrat women usually pursue expanded spending or coverage of care, Republican women instead usually emphasise controlling costs and targeted spending to demonstrate fiscal responsibility (Swers 2016, 251–53). In the next section, we explore whether there are gender gaps in opinions on the key policy issues of the 2020 election, drawing on the NZES. We supplement descriptive statistics with qualitative material from the Gender Justice Project's election scorecard research.

## Gender and Covid-19, economic and social policies

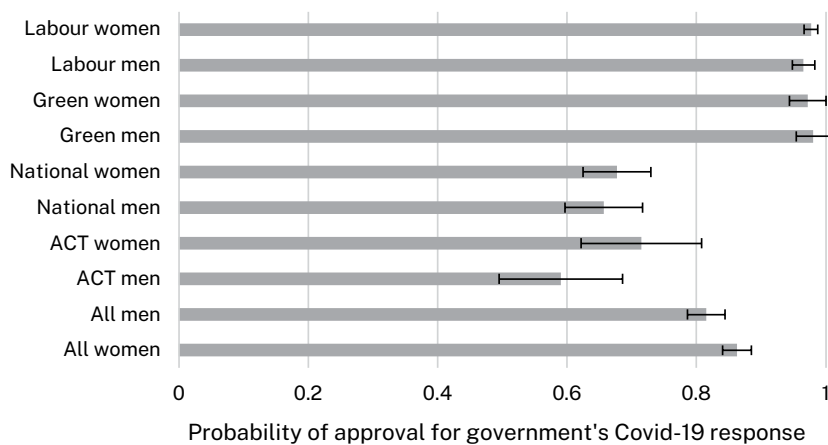
Applying this to New Zealand, we might expect that, because the Labour Party occupies the healthcare policy domain, voters are likely to find cognitive harmony in a Labour-led government adopting a public health approach to the pandemic. In contrast, Judith Collins committed a National government to tax cuts without concomitant cuts to health, education, and social services. Expenditure instead tended to focus on changing behaviour to improve health outcomes in the longer term—an approach reminiscent of previous 'social investment' programs (Cooke 2020). Collins also pledged to convene a public health summit to review alert level settings and 'to work

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9 Although in New Zealand the government was slow to respond to expert advice from Māori health scientists.

out how our economy can flourish when it's clear COVID-19 will be with us for some time', with Collins further noting that '[w]e need to balance the social and economic costs, while ensuring the best possible health response' (Collins 2020).

In Figure 7.6, we see that the government received high levels of support for its Covid-19 response from Labour and Green voters of both genders. Overall, women were slightly more positive towards the government's response than were men—a gap that reflects the differences among ACT and, to a lesser extent, National voters. The result also mirrors international literature that included New Zealand, which found that there were significant gender differences in agreement and compliance with pandemic restraint measures including the closure of schools, nonessential businesses, and institutions, election postponement, travel, border, and quarantine restrictions, social meeting restrictions, and masking requirements. New Zealand respondents had comparatively high percentages of restriction measure agreement, at between 55 and 65 per cent. In addition, women were more likely than men to comply with the measures (Galasso et al. 2020).



**Figure 7.6 Support for the government's Covid-19 response by gender and party vote**

Source: Vowles et al. (2022).

This is despite there being some disquiet with Labour's approach to social and health policy in the leadup to the 2020 election. Criticism was directed at the minimal implementation of the welfare reforms, particularly with respect to the material wellbeing of sole parents (CPAG 2021). Alongside this, the government's Covid-19 economic response policies were deemed



to have done little for women in vulnerable sectors or for the women who made up a considerable component of essential workers, while also shouldering much of the increased weight of unpaid care work (Waddell et al. 2021).

Documents released under the *Official Information Act* revealed that the Ministry for Women in early April 2020 provided minister Julie Anne Genter with prospective gender analyses of the likely negative impacts of Covid-19 on different groups of women. A further summary document was sent to Finance Minister Grant Robertson at the end of April. An analysis of possible mitigating actions was completed in May, but there is little evidence that the 2020 budget reflected these findings (Curtin et al. 2020).

In mid-2020, the Gender Justice Collective (GJC) formed over the concern that political parties were not addressing the inequalities facing, and needs of, diverse groups of women. The GJC developed the #YouChoose2020 survey, an online, self-selecting questionnaire distributed to women nationwide between 30 July and 4 September through women's networks and community organisations. More than 3,500 people completed the survey: 96 per cent identified as women and 3 per cent as nonbinary; 82 per cent were Pākehā, 10 per cent Māori, and 4 per cent Pasifika. The academic advisory team used the survey results to identify women's policy priorities and analysed the policies of eight political parties against these priorities. The resulting #WeChoose2020 Election Scorecard collated this analysis, with the Green Party scoring the highest overall.<sup>10</sup>

Care responsibilities, health, and financial wellbeing were among the policy priorities YouChoose2020 survey respondents identified (New Zealand Herald 2020). These are also longstanding policy priorities for women NZES participants. Aimer's (1993) analysis of the 1990 NZES found that gender differences were only significant in attitudes towards five of 12 policy issues surveyed: health, welfare, education, environment, and defence. The greatest difference was in health, with 15 percentage points separating men's and women's ratings of this issue as 'extremely important'. Women were also significantly more likely than men to support increased government health and education expenditure. Aimer argued that the size of gender gaps depended partly on the salience of these issues during elections. For example, by 1990, New Zealand had experienced six years of retrenchment and economic

10 Available from: [d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/genderjustice/pages/25/attachments/original/1602401390/GJC\\_Matrix\\_A4\\_Landscape\\_v3.6.pdf?1602401390](https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/genderjustice/pages/25/attachments/original/1602401390/GJC_Matrix_A4_Landscape_v3.6.pdf?1602401390).

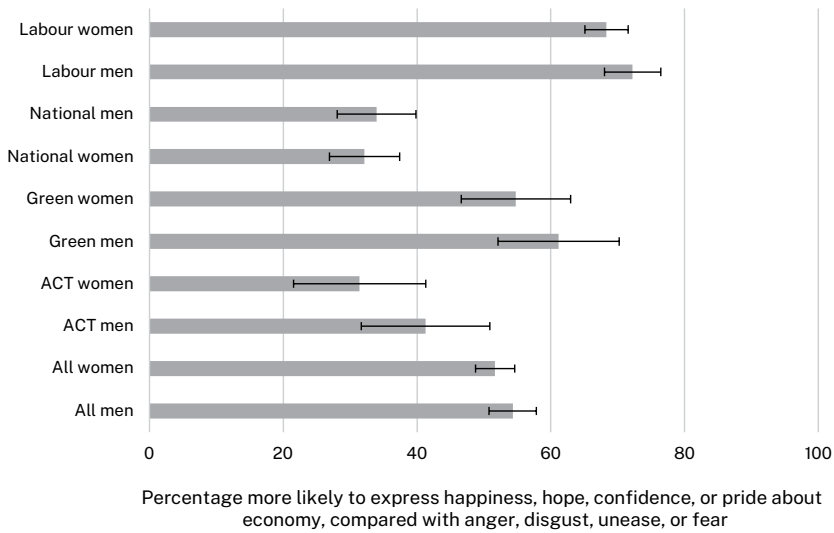
reform, which had impacted on health and education (Castles et al. 1995). The NewLabour Party formed in 1989 to oppose Labour's ideological shift to the economic right, and Aimer (1993, 119–21) found that women made up 63 per cent of these 'new left' voters in the 1990 election survey. Since 1990, we have seen that women are significantly less likely than men to vote for the smaller right-wing parties (Vowles et al. 2017).

With the advent of Covid-19, we might expect a gender gap in attitudes about the importance of health, care work, and financial wellbeing in the 2020 election. International comparative research completed in mid-2020—which included New Zealand in the pooled analysis—found that women were more likely than men to perceive the pandemic as a very serious health problem, despite men having a higher mortality risk globally. New Zealand studies found that pandemic job losses were unequally distributed between men and women, with women more likely than men to lose work (Galasso et al. 2020). Women also performed more domestic labour than men before the pandemic, even in households where both genders had outside employment (Sibley et al. 2021). These inequities continued during 2020 (Waddell et al. 2021), despite lockdowns providing more opportunities for men and women to share housework and parenting.

NZES data indicate that women were concerned about issues of economic security, health expenditure, and welfare. We asked NZES participants to indicate their emotional responses to a range of issues and situations: participants could choose multiple responses from a mix of positive emotions (for example, happy, hopeful, proud) and negative ones (such as angry, disgusted, afraid). Specifically, we asked participants to react to 'New Zealand's economic situation' and added the eight emotional reactions together, with each positive scoring one, and minus one for a negative. Figure 7.7 reveals that, across all parties, women felt less positive about the economic situation than did men but, overall, there was not a significant gender difference, indicating that party vote or partisan views, not gender, were the main driver of emotional responses to the economic situation.

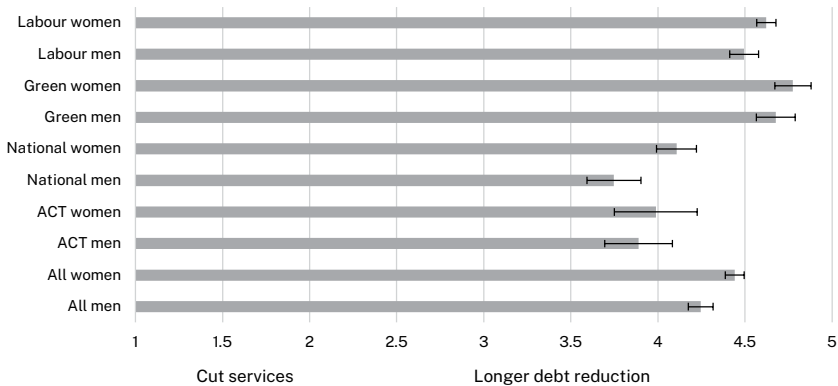
The government did spend up large in its response to Covid-19 in 2020, although much of the focus was on wage subsidies and employment packages. This was in part possible because fiscal stimulus could be provided without undue long-term risk to the government budget. The budget surplus for the half-year to December 2019 was NZ\$500 million higher than forecast, and the budget surpluses over the previous two years were \$12 billion (Robertson 2020). Government debt was also comparatively low.

## 7. GENDERING LEADERSHIP AND POLICY DURING COVID-19



**Figure 7.7 Positive emotional responses to economic situation by gender and party vote**

Source: Vowles et al. (2022).

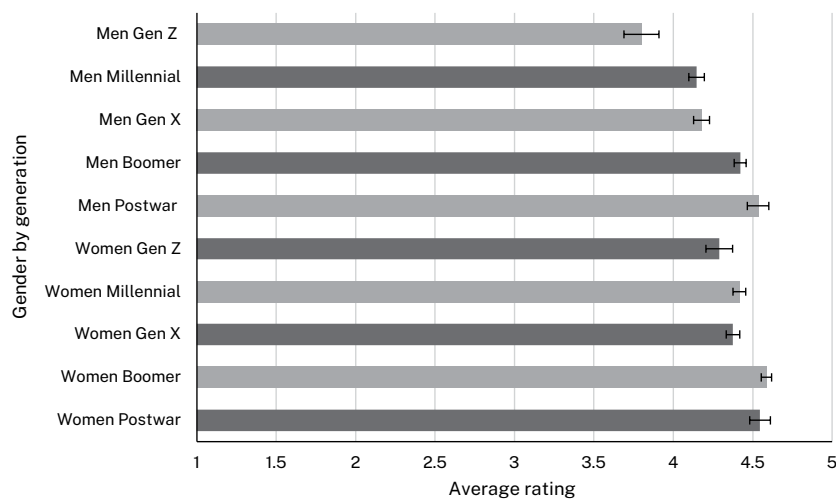


**Figure 7.8 Gender attitudes to cutting social services and debt reduction by party**

Source: Vowles et al. (2022).

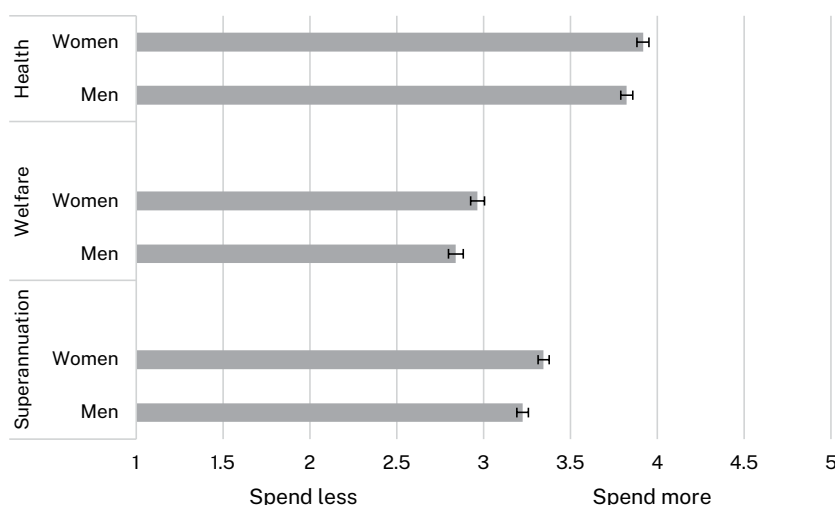
Thus, we might expect limited public concern in terms of the trade-off between supplying social services and debt reduction in 2020. What we see in Figure 7.9, however, is that women are significantly more likely than men to express a desire to hold off debt reduction options. When examining this trade-off by combinations of gender and party vote, we find that left-wing voters are more likely to want to wait than right-bloc voters. Moreover, National-voting women were significantly more likely than National-voting men to want to maintain social services rather than pursue debt reduction.

We also undertook a descriptive examination of the extent to which age and gender mattered to the question of cutting social services versus reducing debt. Deckman et al. (2020) argue that consideration of the views of younger generations is increasingly necessary given the range of political protests led by young voters in recent years, including in response to climate change, BlackLivesMatter, and #MeToo. Recognising that the economic impacts of Covid-19 are likely to significantly impact Gen Z voters, Deckman et al. (2020) explored the gender differences in this cohort’s health and economic concerns in the United States. While partisanship erases most of the gender gaps, they found young women were significantly more likely to be concerned about job security and young men were more likely to be concerned about their personal health.



**Figure 7.9 Ratings by gender and generation on cutting social services (1) versus taking longer to reduce debt (5)**

Source: Vowles et al. (2022).



**Figure 7.10 Gender differences in support for further spending across health, welfare, and superannuation**

Source: Vowles et al. (2022).

Our NZES health and social services questions were not sufficiently alike to allow for a direct comparison with Deckman et al. (2020). However, we did test to see how different age groups viewed the trade-off between cutting social services and reducing debt. Figure 7.10 shows that Generation Z men were far more likely than Gen Z women to want to cut social services, rather than take longer to reduce debt (a mean of 3.8 versus 4.3). In fact, significance tests confirm that Gen Z men were more likely than every other group to want to cut social services. Moreover, except for a difference between Gen X and Millennials, variation between the other cohorts of men was also statistically significant. These results suggest that the trade-off between social services and debt reduction varies considerably across men by age cohort, but not for women. This could mean that men become less concerned about reducing debt or more concerned about social service provision as they age (or it could be a cohort effect).

Despite these differences in responses, we find that, in 2020, both men and women NZES participants were supportive of increased spending on health. In asking this question, respondents were reminded that ‘more’ or ‘much more’ spending could require a tax increase (Figure 7.8). This reflects findings by Lloyd (2022) that, over time, health spending matters to both women and men. That said, there remains a clear gender gap on each of the social policy issues, with women wanting more spending than

men. Perhaps the surprise here is that both women and men show less support for increased spending on welfare. This result underscores earlier findings by Louise Humpage (2014), who revealed that targeted social policy expenditure tends to be less popular than universal allowances. However, given Covid-19 lockdowns brought with them predictions that unemployment rates would rise, we might have expected welfare benefits to become more widely accessed and thus more acceptable. Our NZES analysis suggests otherwise.

## Conclusions

The 2020 election was notable for a range of factors relevant to gender in politics: first, for the substantial international media attention on Jacinda Ardern and her political style. Second, for the presence of women party leaders during the campaign and the number of women parliamentarians and parliamentary party leaders who were elected. Third, for the emergence of Covid-19 and the gendered impacts of the government's policy response.

In this chapter, we investigated these factors using descriptive statistical analysis to draw a picture of gender gaps in attitudes and results. We found differences in the way women feel and respond to questions on a range of policy issues. For example, women were on average less likely than men of the same party to feel positive about the economic situation and were more likely to support increased government spending on a range of social items including health, if the alternative was reducing debt more rapidly. Women were also more positive about the government's Covid-19 response although there was variation across parties.

More generally, women voters rewarded the Labour government in the 2020 election to an extent not seen in previous elections in New Zealand. The party also won back a share of male voters (albeit not to the same extent as women, nor to its pre-MMP levels of support). Before the arrival of Jacinda Ardern, the centre-right National Party had successfully wooed women away from Labour while the latter was in opposition and led by a series of less-than-inspiring men. This is not to suggest that women leaders drive Labour's support among women, but in this election, our analysis indicates voters, both women and men, found Ardern competent, likeable, and trustworthy as a leader. In conclusion, New Zealand voters may not have shared the international media's glowing opinions of Ardern, but in 2020 their vote choice suggested otherwise.

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Appendix 7.1

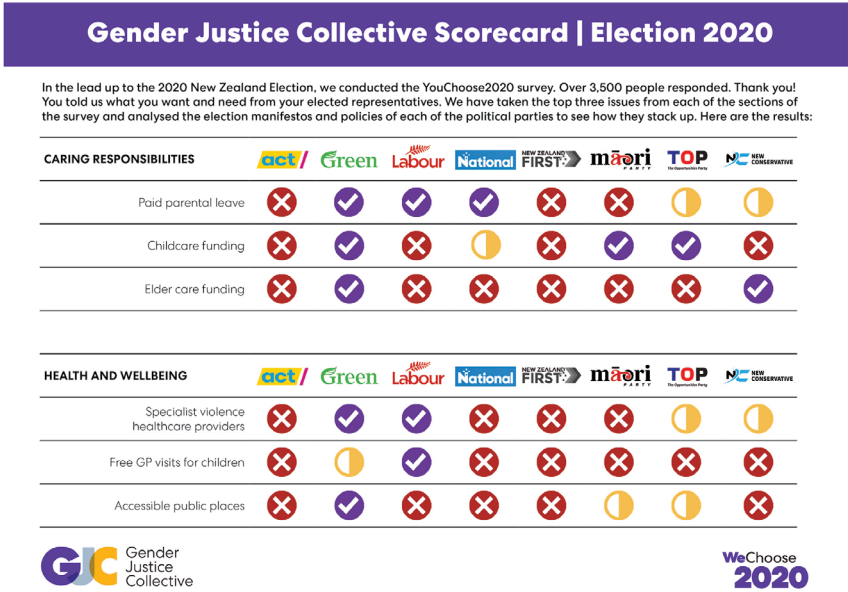


Figure A7.1 Gender Justice Collective Scorecard: Election 2020

Source: [d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/genderjustice/pages/25/attachments/original/1602401390/GJC\\_Matrix\\_A4\\_Landscape\\_v3.6.pdf?1602401390](https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/genderjustice/pages/25/attachments/original/1602401390/GJC_Matrix_A4_Landscape_v3.6.pdf?1602401390).

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